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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the evaluation of writing in English as a second language looks at conflicting approaches and viewpoints in the literature and suggests strategies for classroom evaluation. Conflicts are found in the literature concerning the importance of writing evaluation, the types of assessment to be used, and procedures for scoring writing samples. It is suggested that teachers should (1) have knowledge about both composition and second language learning; (2) change the focus in writing assessment from measurement to evaluation, i.e., from product to process; (3) know the students and their cognitive and linguistic needs; (4) emphasize communicative competence; (5) create a classroom environment in which students are willing to communicate ideas and accept feedback; (6) monitor students' writing appropriately, using methods that allow for individual development but provide adequate feedback; and (7) help students to monitor their own work. Twenty-four references are listed. (MSE)

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ASSESSING WRITING IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the principles of writing as a process of discovery conducive to second language acquisition and development. Conflicting viewpoints in the literature of writing assessment are discussed with special emphasis on how these conflicting issues affect second language teachers. Strategies and steps to assess writing in the second language classroom are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a highly personal activity and a process of discovery. According to Murray (1978), the most accurate definition of writing, is that it is the process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it. Brosell (1986) described writing as a complex process of discovering and conveying meaning, a process that involves rhetorical, structural, and mechanical choices governed by purpose and audience rather than by compositional rules. Creative as well as practical writing needs to be functional and requires creativity and knowledge. Recent literature has focused on writing as a process of discovery, where students are taught to identify an audience, and write about the topic for that audiece. Hughey, Wormuth, Hartfield, & Jacobs

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(1983) mention writing serves four relevant, enduring purposes: communication, critical thinking and problem solving, self actualization, and control of personal environment. The central component of the whole writing process is self-evaluation. According to Johnston (1987), it is the heart of the revision process, because without self-correction learning cannot improve, and without self-monitoring, correction cannot occur. So self-questioning becomes reflective and focused and makes students become part of the evaluation process.

Writing teachers should examine their teaching to answer questions such as: 1) how do I assess a process of discovery; 2) how do I look at writing as a thinking, on-going, problem-solving process; and 3) how do I evaluate a process that involves multiple stages in which stages overlap continuously. These questions are even more relevant when writing is in a second language in which students show limitations with the oral and written aspects of the language. The purpose of this article is to describe principles of writing and steps in assessing writing in ESL classrooms.

ASSESSING WRITING: CONFLICTING VIEWPOINTS

A review of the literature about writing assessment presents conflicting aspects which tend to confuse in-service teachers. One of these aspects is a myriad of attitudes about assessment: ambiguity, incredulity, and insatisfaction. James Britton, in a dialogue with Mayher (Mayher, Lester, & Pradl, 1983) mentioned that he feels very ambiguous about assessment. He recognizes it is a necessity, but a painful necessity. Parents and employers want it, so teachers have to evaluate students' performance. Britton insists not to let evaluating "spread like stain over everything we do" (p.123).

The literature also shows no clear cut ideas on which type of assessment is adequate for writing assessment. Some authorities believe in informal/classroom assessment while others believe in large-scale performance tests. Johnston (1987) summarizes some problematic current assumptions in assessment in the language arts: group assessment is more efficient than individual assessment; individual, informal assessment by teachers is subjective and of little value; assessment should be objective; and success or failure on a test item is useful information. Johnston (1987) mentioned that eventhough research has stressed the importance of teaching the process for effective performance, the need for natural samples of behavior, and evaluating the whole process, current practice follows the former assumptions.

The literature also depicts confusion and insatisfaction with procedures for scoring writing samples. Holistic procedures which assess writing samples as a whole are the most favored. (For different methods of scoring holistically, see Cooper, 1977.) Although White (1986) believes holistic procedures are the most responsive tests to current research, he acknowledges a major drawback which is giving a grade to first drafts, thus obliterating the revision stage within the process. Insatisfaction has also triggered the creation of different writing tests. Faigley, Cherry, Joliffe, and Skinner (cited in Bizell, 1987) presented two new kinds of tests that focus on the composing process: 1) a process log in which students describe what they are doing while working in a writing assignment and 2) a performative assessment to measure changes in students' knowledge of how to respond to different writing situations. Whereas these two tests shed light on the composing process, they bring about more problems to the classroom teachers- what is to be assessed and how are they going to evaluate students' changes/progress?

The classroom becomes the melting pot, the place where all assumptions and ambivalences prevalent in the literature emerge. Many teachers still measure discrete points in writing and/or focus exclusively on grammar and mechanics mainly due to what they were exposed to and because of lack of training. In addition, they are influenced by textbooks that present essay examinations with many weaknesses: 1) it takes much time to judge student responses; 2) essay responses are difficult to score with high reliability; 3) because essay tests are likely to lack objectivity, they may not be useful and valid measures of student achievement; 4) students with same level of achievement but different levels in expression may receive different scores (Hopkins & Antes, 1985). Teachers are led to believe in the superiority of objective evaluations and in writing only for performance tests marked only by experienced evaluators. Writing is then, not considered as a process that could be fostered and assessed in the classroom nor as a thinking process conducive to learning.

Classroom practice gets more complicated when dealing with writing assessment in a second language. English as a second language teachers have to stop and ask themselves: Why do I want my ESL students to write? What is my students' environment and immediate situation? Do my students really need writing? Moreover, teachers have to ask themselves what do they want to accomplish with a particular group or a particular language level. Do teachers want students to put thoughts into words at their own pace in order to learn to communicate? Do teachers want students to develop their language through reading and writing? Do teachers want students to learn the writing process in a second language if the process is still unknown to them? Do teachers want students to learn the different genre schemas, transferable also to their native tongue? Assessment is therefore dependent

on purpose. But purpose is also dependent on knowledge. However, assessing writing is still a confusing task for teachers.

Many teachers are not aware at all of the writing process as a creative, multi-faceted process which includes specific actions: stimulus for writing which in turn initiates the process and provides a purpose, incubation, discovery, generation, and shaping (Hughey et al, 1983). Still many do not conceive writing as an on-going process in which stages interrelate and overlap. Raimes (1983) states that "while writing is going on, it is prewriting, writing, and revision all rolled in one," so students should be made aware that writing is not a "one-shot deal, put down on paper and marked right or wrong" (p. 263).

STRATEGIES TO ASSESS WRITING IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The purpose of this section is to identify and describe those steps and strategies that the authors feel are necessary and useful in assessing writing in second language classrooms.

1) Teachers should have a body of knowledge in two different fields: composition and second language acquisition.

According to Hughey et al (1983), ESL writing teachers should not only understand the complexities involved in learning the writing process for the non-native student, but also know other aspects of the English language such as grammar and the interconnection between reading, speaking, and writing. Teachers should be aware of how a second language is acquired and the factors which affect the outcomes. Teaching strategies as well as students' attitudes, motivation, age, and ability are some of these factors. Teachers should also be aware of the developmental stage in the second language learner in order to suit his/her individual needs. Being knowledgeable in

both fields will help teachers aid students understand the writing process and also assess effectively their language development.

Teachers should be aware of differences in cultural/linguistic conventions so to be able to explain these variances in rhetorical patterns, syntax and lexicon to the second language learner (Carlson and Bridgeman, 1986; Dubin and Olshtain, 1980; Kaplan 1966, 1983).

2) Teachers should change the focus in writing assessment-from measurement to evaluation, from product to process oriented.

Teachers have been trained to correct and mark assuming students will learn. But these attitudes should be modified. Johnston (1987) mentions that if teachers assess according to outcomes, the effect is either success or failure, which brings about little active support and little motivation. When changing the focus, teachers/students will conceive writing as a developmental task, as behaviors which are learned, not imposed upon. The role of teachers is to understand this process of development and as Johnston (1987) says "...to understand the child's understanding of the reading/writing process and to help the child understand what he/she is doing and how to extend it" (p. 346).

3) There is a need to study and understand the second language population and their cognitive and linguistic needs.

Is the ESL population in the early/intermediate/advanced stages of English language development? Are these children/adult ESL learners? If they are professionals, what is their line of work? For example, it has been said that lawyers stress organizational skills (Carlson and Bridgeman, 1986). Decisions should be made on what suitable ways we can cater students' needs and assess them individually in the areas they need more help. If a clear focus of students' needs is identified as well as the teacher's purposes, all will be working for a common goal.

4) Teachers need to emphasize a communicative competence approach.

There is a need to de-emphasize grammar and accuracy and emphasize ideas to convey meaning. Research conducted by Canale and Swain (1979), stresses a functional approach to teaching and testing which integrates knowledge of second language culture, second language, and language in general. They are opposed to a grammar approach since it is a cause of poor motivation in second language learners. Raimes (1983) states that teachers make students more concerned with accuracy and vocabulary than with concepts; teachers make students say something that nobody cares about just to practice something else. Teachers should instead stress students' expression of ideas in a clear way with a sense of purpose and audience. As Raimes (1983) says, we should make them work on what they want to say and on finding ways to say what they cannot express. This way their intellectual and emotional investment has a productive outcome.

5) Teachers should create a classroom environment in which students are willing to communicate ideas and accept feedback.

Are teachers incentivating peer interaction? Is there a positive student-teacher interaction? Mayher, Lester, & Pradl (1983) refer to the teacher as the participant-leader. Very similarly, Graves (cited in Johnston, 1987) had referred to the teacher as the advocate who sits next to the child and establishes eye-contact. Are teachers praising what students produce rather than pointing to their limited vocabulary and incomplete mastery of grammar? Diederich, author of Measuring Growth in English, (cited in Raimes, 1983, p.267), points out that "noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly". Do we make students understand that what they write "has been nurtured in a positive environment

of caring" (Mayher et al, 1983, p. 127). Glenda Bissex says a propos: "Teachers who grow writers in their classrooms also regard pieces of writing as growing things to be nurtured rather than objects to be repaired or fixed" (p. 789). Therefore, when the role of the teacher is changed, the environment is of caring and praising, and the students feel they are active members of the writing community, they will ease their fears, contribute more, and become more open to evaluation, and thus growth.

6) There is a need to monitor students' writing appropriately.

Are teachers utilizing the most advocated forms of assessment? Teachers need to respond to writing samples, hold interviews/conferences with students to evaluate their growth. They should use methods such as the cumulative folder method proposed by Graves (1983) allowing students to pick the papers they want commentary on, or even those for final mark. (Mayher et al, 1983; Johnston, 1987; Graves, 1983) All of these methods not only allow the students to participate in the process and be aware of it, but also develop their concept of good writing. There is a need to keep track of recurrent errors to bring to student attention at conferences, and provide the necessary tools to correct them. Even when pinpointing students' errors, teachers should have in mind, as Raimes says (1983), that we are reading as readers not as checkers. A method proposed by Burt (1975) is to classify errors as global (hindering communication) and local (interfering with a single constituent). Although this method has been considered superficial by Kaplan (1983), it is at least an attempt to deal with error analysis in ESL, following a communicative competence approach.

Another recommended approach is to use conferences to call the attention to discrete points that are not "corrected" in the spoken language because students should not be interrupted in their flow of thought, and

they will not understand our correction at the time. Examples are embedded questions and tag endings, so different in English and the student's native language. Only when students need the information to communicate, they will take advantage of correction. So writing will improve their oral English. As Smith (cited in Hughey et al, p. 41) has said: "We can only improve our spoken language by writing". When students are well advanced we could use a progress tally such as the one proposed by Hughey et al (1983) for monitoring and feedback. This tally goes in accord with a scale called ESL Composition Profile. Using the tally enables the student and the teacher to see what areas need practice and what areas have been mastered.

7) Students have the need to monitor themselves in the classroom.

Are students able to examine and use their own knowledge and experience? Hughey et al (1983) mentioned that writers constantly monitor themselves when they become both participant and spectators, following Britton's view of the writer. As participants they search in their minds for what to say; as spectators, they detach themselves to find flaws in the printed page, assuming the position of critical reader. The classroom could serve these two stands. Ross Winterowd (1983) conceptually divides his classroom into two separate areas- the workshop, "the messy place, highly charged, purposive in terms of writing something for someone for some reason" (p. 239), where the student is the involved participant, acquiring distinct and complex skills, and the laboratory, where students learn primarily editing skills. Therefore, linguistic units are taught in the laboratory, but the process is acquired in the workshop by facilitating writing.

While the student is monitoring himself, he/she is becoming his/her own teacher. Irmscher said : "Good writers do not have to be taught, they

can completely be self taught". Murray has also stated: "The writing teacher usually teaches most of his students to work in an environment which allows them to teach themselves" (both cited in Hughey et al, 1983, p. 41). What they are pointing here is what Bissex (1986) had said: that the role of education is to affirm each child's inner teacher. Therefore, the writing class should provide that environment for students to learn/develop specific aspects in writing ability and become their own teachers as a byproduct.

Students also monitor their writing when they go from the known to the unknown, from expressive writing to more articulate, sophisticated modes. Britton (1970) favors the use of expressive writing (about personal experience) in schools because it is more similar to the flow of thought and because it is a building block to more diversified transactional and poetic discourse. Following this line of thought, Spack and Sadow (1983) use writing journals, as an instructional approach for early English as a second language students, to foster expressive writing. Moreover, writing journals for them will not only modify writing attitudes and habits, but also will make students understand the purpose of writing- to explore, develop, focus, organize, and share ideas with others.

Monitoring leads us to the last issue we wish to address in this paper: what should be that "necessary" final grade? If writing is perceived as a continuum (Mayher et al, 1983), we should consider assessing according to students' performance against themselves and students' performance against others. If writing is considered as a developmental task, students' performance should be evaluated according to how they were and how they are now. The final mark should be in accord to what we have taught, and what we believe our philosophy and practice should be.

Mayher et al (1983) advise that students should understand the rationale of the evaluation, because students' participation is important in the process. Hughey et al (1983) posit teachers should explain the criteria used for final marking. They suggest giving to students the scale that would be used for evaluating papers, so they would know not only what is expected of them, but also to monitor their writing to established standards.

Conclusion

Writing and assessing writing in the classroom have to be handled with great care. It is in the classroom where students acquire the competencies to function in school and outside school. Since writing is a process conducive to analytical and rational thinking, it should be given upmost importance and consideration. Four issues should be taken into consideration when evaluating and/or monitoring students' writing:

1) Classromm teachers are evaluating a process, not a final product.

2) The assessment should reflect knowledge of the process- a process of discovery and meaning making, knowledge of how writing takes place, and knowledge of first/second language acquisition.

3) The assessment should show a purpose and the stepping stones to reach a specific goal.

4) The assessment should occur in an environment which fosters students' language/writing development, as well as a "gusto" for it.

The above principles prepare students to meet future personal/professional requirements, always remembering that writing is situation specific and that it may vary among disciplines. Good writing is knowing how to convey the meant intention to an audience.

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